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ABSTRACT

Listening and speaking, the most used language skills in the classroom, are critical for functioning in an English language context, and are logical starting points for language instruction for low-literacy learners. Speaking is an interactive process of constructing meaning that involves producing, receiving, and processing information. A speaker's skills and habits affect the success of any exchange. Speakers must be able to anticipate and produce expected patterns of specific discourse situations, manage discrete elements such as turn-taking and providing feedback, choose correct vocabulary, use appropriate facial expressions and body language, produce the phonological patterns of the language, use grammar accurately, assess the audience, apply strategies to enhance comprehensibility, and attend to the success of the interaction and adjust components as needed. Speech lessons can follow the usual pattern of preparation, presentation, practice, evaluation, and extension. A sample lesson on choosing topics for small talk illustrates this sequence. In-class speaking tasks fall into six categories: imitative; intensive; responsive; transactional; interpersonal; and extensive. Speaking assessment may take varied forms. They should reflect instruction and be incorporated from the beginning of instruction. Criteria should be clearly defined and understandable. Contains 10 references. (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse on Literacy Education) (MSE)

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Improving Adult English Language Learners' Speaking Skills

by MaryAnn Cunningham Florez
National Clearinghouse for ESL Literacy Education

Communicative and whole language instructional approaches promote integration of speaking, listening, reading, and writing in ways that reflect natural language use. But opportunities for speaking and listening require structure and planning if they are to support language development. This digest describes what speaking involves and what good speakers do in the process of expressing themselves. It also presents an outline for creating an effective speaking lesson and for assessing learners' speaking skills.

Oral communication skills in adult ESL instruction

Outside the classroom, listening is used twice as often as speaking, which in turn is used twice as much as reading and writing (Rivers, 1981). Inside the classroom, speaking and listening are the most often used skills (Brown, 1994). They are recognized as critical for functioning in an English language context, both by teachers and by learners. These skills are also logical instructional starting points when learners have low literacy levels (in English or their native language) or limited formal education, or when they come from language backgrounds with a non-Roman script or a predominantly oral tradition. Further, with the drive to incorporate workforce readiness skills into adult ESL instruction, practice time is being devoted to such speaking skills as reporting, negotiating, clarifying, and problem solving (Grognet, 1997).

What speaking is

Speaking is an interactive process of constructing meaning that involves producing *and* receiving and processing information (Brown, 1994; Burns & Joyce, 1997). Its form and meaning are dependent on the context in which it occurs, including the participants themselves, their collective experiences, the physical environment, and the purposes for speaking. It is often spontaneous, open-ended, and evolving. However, speech is not always unpredictable. Language functions (or patterns) that tend to recur in certain discourse situations (e.g., declining an invitation or requesting time off from work), can be identified and charted (Burns & Joyce, 1997). For example, when a salesperson asks "May I help you?" the expected discourse sequence includes a statement of need, response to the need, offer of appreciation, acknowledgement of the appreciation, and a leave-taking exchange. Speaking requires that learners not only know how to produce specific points of language such as grammar, pronunciation, or vocabulary (*linguistic competence*), but also that they understand when, why, and in what ways to produce language (*sociolinguistic competence*). Finally, speech has its own skills, structures, and conventions different from written language (Burns & Joyce, 1997; Carter & McCarthy, 1995; Cohen, 1996). A good speaker synthesizes this array of skills and knowledge to succeed in a given speech act.

What a good speaker does

A speaker's skills and speech habits have an impact on the success of any exchange (Van Duzer, 1997). Speakers must be able to anticipate and then produce the expected patterns of specific discourse situations. They must also manage discrete elements such as turn-taking, rephrasing, providing feedback, or redirecting (Burns & Joyce, 1997). For example, a learner involved in the exchange with the salesperson described previously must know the usual pattern that such an interaction follows and access that knowledge as the exchange progresses. The learner must also choose the correct vocabulary to describe the item sought, rephrase or emphasize words to clarify the description if the clerk does not understand, and use appropriate facial expressions to indicate satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the service. Other skills and knowledge that instruction might address include the following:

- producing the sounds, stress patterns, rhythmic structures, and intonations of the language;
- using grammar structures accurately;
- assessing characteristics of the target audience, including shared knowledge or shared points of reference, status and power relations of participants, interest levels, or differences in perspectives;
- selecting vocabulary that is understandable and appropriate for the audience, the topic being discussed, and the setting in which the speech act occurs;
- applying strategies to enhance comprehensibility, such as emphasizing key words, rephrasing, or checking for listener comprehension;
- using gestures or body language; and
- paying attention to the success of the interaction and adjusting components of speech such as vocabulary, rate of speech, and complexity of grammar structures to maximize listener comprehension and involvement (Brown, 1994).

Teachers should monitor learners' speech production to determine what skills and knowledge they already have and what areas need development. Bailey and Savage's *New Ways in Teaching Speaking* (1994), and Lewis's *New Ways in Teaching Adults* (1997) offer suggestions for activities that can address different skills.

General outline of a speaking lesson

Speaking lessons can follow the usual pattern of preparation, presentation, practice, evaluation, and extension. The teacher can use the *preparation* step to establish a context for the speaking task (where, when, why, and with whom it will occur) and to initiate awareness of the speaking skill to be targeted (asking for clarification, stressing key words, using reduced forms of words). In *presentation*, the teacher can provide learners with a preproduction model that furthers learner comprehension and helps them become more attentive observers of language use. *Practice* involves learners in reproducing the targeted structure, usually in a controlled or

highly supported manner. *Evaluation* involves directing attention to the skill being examined and asking learners to monitor and assess their own progress. Finally, *extension* consists of activities that ask learners to use the strategy or skill in a different context or authentic communicative situation, or to integrate use of the new skill or strategy with previously acquired ones (Brown, 1994; Burns & Joyce, 1997; Carter & McCarthy, 1995).

Example of a speaking lesson:
Choosing appropriate topics for small talk

1. *Preparation.* Show the learners a picture of two people conversing in a familiar casual setting. (The setting will be determined by a prior needs assessment.) Ask them to brainstorm what the people might be discussing (i.e., what topics, vocabulary, typical phrases).
2. *Presentation.* Present several video clips of small talk in casual situations. Have learners complete a worksheet in which they describe or list the topics discussed, the context in which the speech is occurring, and any phrases that seem to typify small talk. Follow up with a discussion of the kinds of topics that are appropriate for small talk, the factors in the specific situations that affect topic selection (e.g., relationships of participants, physical setting), and typical phrases used in small talk. Chart this information.
3. *Practice.* Give learners specific information about the participants and the setting of a scenario where small talk will take place. In pairs, have them list topics that might be discussed by the participants and simple phrases they might use. Learners then engage in improvised dialogues based on these simple phrases.
4. *Evaluation.* Give pairs a teacher-prepared dialogue based on their scenario from #3. Ask them to compare their improvised dialogues with the prepared dialogue, analyzing the similarities, differences, and reasons for both.
5. *Extension.* Have learners go individually or in small groups into various contexts in the community (work, school, church, bus stop) and record the conversations they hear. Ask them to report their findings back to the class, and then have the class discuss these findings.

In-class speaking tasks

Although dialogues and conversations are the most obvious and most often used speaking activities in language classrooms, a teacher can select activities from a variety of tasks. Brown (1994) lists six possible task categories:

Imitative–Drills in which the learner simply repeats a phrase or structure (e.g., "Excuse me." or "Can you help me?") for clarity and accuracy;

Intensive–Drills or repetitions focusing on specific phonological or grammatical points, such as minimal pairs or repetition of a series of imperative sentences;

Responsive–Short replies to teacher or learner questions or comments, such as a series of answers to yes/no questions;

Transactional–Dialogues conducted for the purpose of information exchange, such as information-gathering interviews, role plays, or debates;

Interpersonal–Dialogues to establish or maintain social relationships, such as personal interviews or casual conversation role plays; and

Extensive–Extended monologues such as short speeches, oral reports, or oral summaries.

These tasks are not sequential. Each can be used independently or they can be integrated with one another, depending on learners' needs. For example, if learners are not using appropriate sentence intonations when participating in a *transactional* activity that focuses on the skill of politely interrupting to make a point, the teacher might decide to follow up with a brief *imitative* lesson targeting this feature.

When presenting tasks, teachers should tell learners about the language function to be produced in the task and the real context(s) in which it usually occurs. They should provide opportunities for interactive practice and build upon previous instruction as necessary (Burns & Joyce, 1997). Teachers should also be careful not to overload a speaking lesson with other new material such as numerous vocabulary or grammatical structures. This can distract learners from the primary speaking goals of the lesson.

Assessing speaking

Speaking assessments can take many forms, from oral sections of standardized tests such as the Basic English Skills Test (BEST) or the English as a Second Language Oral Assessment (ESLOA) to authentic assessments such as progress checklists, analysis of taped speech samples, or anecdotal records of speech in classroom interactions. Assessment instruments should reflect instruction and be incorporated from the beginning stages of lesson planning (O'Malley & Pierce, 1996). For example, if a lesson focuses on producing and recognizing signals for turn-taking in a group discussion, the assessment tool might be a checklist to be completed by the teacher or learners in the course of the learners' participation in the discussion. Finally, criteria should be clearly defined and understandable to both the teacher and the learners.

Conclusion

Speaking is key to communication. By considering what good speakers do, what speaking tasks can be used in class, and what specific needs learners report, teachers can help learners improve their speaking and overall oral competency.

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